

**The Promise of Better Days**  
**The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**Micah 5:1-5**  
**December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

As a 5<sup>th</sup> grader at Cornelia Elementary School in Edina, Minnesota I always felt sorry for a fellow-student named Gary. With his high squeaky voice, hyperactivity, social ineptness, and tall, skinny body, Gary was an easy target for grade school thugs. People found it easy to tease Gary until he would as we would say “spas-out.” I never actually participated in the teasing, but I certainly didn’t stop it either. But one day in December, when we were on the playground during the lunch recess, Gary was trapped on the top of a large snow hill. Six boys surrounded him, taunting, teasing and flinging snow at him. As I watched this scene, something snapped inside me. I raced towards the snow hill and dove sideways into the throng of boys, knocking down three of them. After I scampered up the snow hill and joined Gary at the top, I screamed at the thugs, “Hey, if you want to come after Gary, you’ll have to go through **ME.**” After a moment of confusion, one of the bullies yelled, “Yea, let’s pound both of their faces into the snow.” And so they proceeded to pummel both of us. But it was great! For the first time in my career as an elementary student, I actually cared about something beyond me. I was a freedom fighter against oppression and injustice.

That day on an elementary school playground my heart cracked wide open. As I looked around the world – or at least Cornelia Elementary – a voice whispered into my ear, “This isn’t right. It’s not supposed to be this way. These thugs shouldn’t be picking on him. Violence and injustice should not have the upper hand. There has to be better way.” I have no idea where the voice came from. The voice just seemed so loud and clear and obvious. Where did it come from? Of course if you went to any playground on the face of the earth where children talk and play and eventually you’ll hear someone scream the same thing: “Hey, that’s not fair!” Where did that come from? As someone has said (the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright), “A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but on that playground I had heard the same whisper that comes right out of the pages in the Bible. It’s a voice that starts quietly but by the time we get in the section of our Hebrew Bible called the prophets, the voice gets louder and louder. The voice of God coming through those wild-eyed, visionary, peace-hungry prophets went something like this: “You were made for better days. But not just you; the whole world was made for better days. The strong oppress the weak; the rich pummel the poor; nations go to war against nation. But I, the Lord, have made you for better days. And I will bring those better days into existence.”

Those ancient Jews had a word for it – they called it peace or the Hebrew word for it: Shalom. In the Bible God’s peace or God’s shalom meant so much more than just the absence of war. It also meant more than just a positive state in my soul or a private transaction between me and God. The longing for God’s shalom certainly included those things, but for those radical, ancient Jewish believers, who kept longing and aching and

yearning for better days, peace was much bigger and broader than that. Shalom meant not just inner peace or spiritual peace; it meant wholeness and completeness throughout all of creation. It meant the end of injustice. It meant that the rich wouldn't chew up the poor anymore. It meant all the brokenness in the world would be set and healed like a bone in our body gets healed. It meant that people would actually love one another. And the peace would flow deep and broad. It would even embrace all of creation – animals and plants, for instance.

So as the story of the Bible unfolded, God kept dropping hints and clues that would awaken our hearts to long for better days. And for those ancient Jewish followers of God, that promise, that hope and aching for better days, were wrapped up in a person. *Someone* is coming, they kept saying. *Someone* is coming who will open the door to peace. The big question is: Who? Who is it? It's like watching a CSI episode develop, observing the clues come together. The prophet Isaiah put it this way: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given ... and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Did you that last title? *Someone* is coming who will be the Prince of Peace, the Leader of Shalom. In Isaiah 11 God whispered again, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit ..." Who is this person, this bearer of Shalom? Where will he come from? We don't know, but the clues are starting to come together. We know that he will bring peace. Verses 4-9 of Isaiah 11 paint a picture of big, cosmic, all-creation shalom coming to the earth.

A few minutes ago you heard an ancient passage about Shalom from a small book in the Bible. Read Micah 5:1-5a. These words were written by man named Micah who lived about 700 years before Jesus was born. He grew up in a mid-sized town called Moresheth, about 25 miles south of the capital city of Jerusalem. Micah was a prophet and the Hebrew word for prophet literally means "to see." The prophets saw things that everyone else wanted to ignore. So Micah saw gangs of thugs beating up little guys on snow hills (Read 2:9 and 3:1-2). Micah saw all of this violence and injustice and it didn't just outrage him. It also connected him once again with those ancient promises of better days. God whispered into his ear, "Remember, Micah, *someone* is coming. *Someone* who can bring peace. The bearer of shalom is coming."

And so the promises of better days keep popping up in this little book. *Someone* is coming. Notice chapter 4 verse 3 – "He judges between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations for and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." It's a picture of peace, deep and rich and wide shalom

Now for many of us perhaps we knew about this longing for better days when we were 13 or 15 or 23, but then we got busy and decided to settle into "real life." Who has time to dream about better days when I'm not sure how to make it through this day? I have bills to pay and kids to drive and a term paper to finish and health problems to resolve and soon there will be snow to shovel and a retirement plan to build. It just goes on and on. Longing for peace, longing for justice, aching for better days ... I just don't have the time and energy anymore.

After all, we say, if I actually looked long and hard at the world around me, I'd just get depressed and cynical. For instance, try an experiment: purely at random, pick up a copy of the NY Times and ask yourself how many of the articles relate to the world's longing and aching for peace and justice in the world. I tried this experiment on Wednesday of this week (December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2006) and I got so depressed that I had to escape by turning to the sports section. There I read an article on a football player who was fined \$35,000 for spitting in the face of another player. Ah, and here's another story of the brawl during a New York Knicks game that resulted in mass suspensions for both teams.

No wonder we're cynical. No wonder we stopped longing for better days. No wonder we started going with the flow. But then every once in a while something cracks our hearts wide open and that voice whispers in our ear again, "No, you were still made for better days. There is peace because there is a Peace-giver; there is a longing for Shalom because there is a Shalom-bearer."

For instance, in chapter 5 we hear another whisper from God. "Someone is coming to bring peace." Micah's times were much like our times. Verse 1 describes a king being publicly humiliated – "They will strike Israel's ruler on the cheek." Verse 3 describes the time when the nation would be conquered, divided and sent into exile. Micah compared these days (in verse 3) as days of abandonment and groaning, just like a woman who is groaning to give birth. But into this sad and violent and seemingly hopeless situation, God would come, the Shalom-bearer would come.

But look carefully, warns Micah, because you might miss his coming. When God comes to bring peace, it will occur so quietly that you just might miss it. That's the way God's shalom comes: not with a marching band and hoopla and press coverage. It comes quietly in out of the way places to unlikely people. In Isaiah 11 God already told us that the Messiah would come like a branch growing out of a dead stump. From death and decay – poof – the peace-bringer would arise. Now we're told in verse 2 that this Coming One, this Messiah, this Saving One, will come out of another very quiet place – Bethlehem. It literally means "house of bread" but it was a small, insignificant town. God comes quietly otherwise we might get scared out of our wits.

Look what he will do (see verse 4): "he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord ... and they will live securely (ah, at last we can have real peace!), for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth." Do you see again how big and broad and all-encompassing shalom is? And then, finally, there's this little line: "And he will be their peace." Again, it's wrapped up in one person. Peace, Shalom – this reality we're aching and longing for, this reality that seems just out of our reach, this reality that we still can't get away from, this reality that sets our hearts aching once again, this reality that seems so elusive and maybe even far-fetched – it has come and it's wrapped up in a Person, Messiah.

Who is it? Again, this CSI investigation will have to wait for more clues. Micah hits a dead end. He knows that this shalom is big and beautiful and real and deep. He knows

that Someone is coming to bring us this peace. But it will have to wait ... until Christmas. In the New Testament, 700 years later, there's a story about a strange birth. Someone is born and the clues start to connect and point in the same direction. Just as Micah predicted, this Peace-bringer comes from Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-12). Another witness tells proclaims about this about the Coming One: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (see Luke 1:78-79)." And then he comes and suddenly we read that an entire host of angels start singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favors" (Luke 2:14). Could it be? Is this the one all the clues were pointing to? I guess that's what you'll have to decide. You'll have to back up and think it over. Is it real? Is this just a make-believe story? Perhaps, but then again ... well, maybe it's true.

Around the globe tonight followers of Jesus will celebrate that the peace God intended for his creation – once lost because of sin, often whispered into the ears of God's prophets – that peace has now come in Jesus. He's the One Micah saw who would be our peace.

Of course this can sound so abstract and impersonal? What does it mean? How does this change my life? In 1992 I met Gary again at my fifteen year high school reunion. I was now living as a follower of Jesus; Gary had become a full-fledged member of the Communist Party. He was currently spending most of his time in southeast Asia trying to topple the government in an unidentified island. Gary asked me, "So, anyway, my comrade, why are you a Christian? What difference does it make? Why don't you do something really worthwhile with your life – like toppling a government in southeast Asia?"

I can't remember what I said. After all, I was still a little shocked by his dark green fatigues and thick black glasses and his references to Marx and Mao. But if I could have this conversation all over again, I'd respond to Gary with two simple points. First, I need peace with God. I wanted peace everywhere in the world, but the message of Jesus, the revolution of peace that started on that first Christmas, means this: peace has to start in my heart. I can't be an effective instrument for peace until I find peace within in my relationship with God. According to the biblical story, the missing piece (if you'll excuse the pun) begins in our lack of peace with God. How God did that is a long story, but the Bible sums it up this way: everything Jesus did – living, teaching, dying on the cross, rising from the dead – was designed to reconcile us with God the Father. The Bible tells us that our relationship with God was not at peace. As a matter of fact, the Bible tells us that we are at war with God. We're not just victims and screw-ups; we're rebels who must learn to lay down our arms and surrender – otherwise we'll never find real peace. That's why the New Testament declares so wildly and joyfully that this peace has been offered: "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Paul was a good Jew. As a good Jew, Paul was steeped in the story of the Bible, the story of Isaiah and Micah, the story of shalom. God had whispered into his heart, "Someone is coming. The peace-bringer is coming." Paul

resisted that good news for a long time, but then Jesus broke through into his heart and he knew that the Promised Shalom-bearer had come.

Without this peace with God, I'm still part of the problem, not part of the solution. When I first started reading the Bible all the talk about being a sinner just annoyed me. I wanted God to boost my self-esteem. Instead, the Bible told me that I was a lost sinner. But now I actually appreciate this honest appraisal of my life. I find this attractive and compelling. Deep down I know that I don't have peace with God. Deep down I know I'm not always part of the solution; I can often be part of the problem. Deep down I know that I'm not connected with God's peace: I'm not an instrument of his peace to a broken world. I need to get right with God. And only Jesus, the Peace-bringer, can do that on my behalf.

Second, in Jesus I can become a peacemaker in this world. I can be an instrument of God's peace. I'm not just a sinner and I'm not even just a sinner saved by grace. Nor is following Jesus just a matter of enjoying peace in my heart or peace with my relationship with God. Messiah calls us to join his revolutionary movement of bringing shalom to a broken world.

As a follower of Jesus I am now called to announce the good news that others can be reconciled to God. We begin this peacemaking journey in our homes and neighborhoods and families. We become peacemakers. Peace does not mean the absence of conflict; it means that we will commit ourselves to work through the conflict to bring peace in our relationships (a husband and wife). We begin to treat people around us with deep respect and dignity – the people that iron our shirts and make our coffee and clean up our omelets are people that Messiah Jesus also came for. We stand against any of these people being treated with injustice. We ask for Messiah to bring his peace into our city and our community.

Being a peacemaker under Messiah's reign also propels us to live in hope. By ourselves, left to our own strategies and devices and efforts, we can never finish the job of peacemaking. Our efforts are so limited and frail and fragile. We build programs and institutions and hospitals and schools; we start movements and initiatives; but they tend to run down or grow corrupt. All of our efforts are partial at best; at worst, they are deeply flawed, filled with our own ego and unmet needs. But this is the promise from King Jesus the Messiah: he will finish the job. That's why when people ask: *I like the idea of peace in the world, but why do I need God? Why can't I just bypass that peace with God stage and just move right into the good stuff?* The Bible responds by reminding us that we're sinners and we're creatures with so many limitations. Scientists tell us that even the universe is winding down. Eventually, it will all unravel. But God has a plan; God will bring his peace, his shalom into the universe (See Revelations 21:1-3).

Now notice that this call from Jesus to be a peacemaker is so incredibly hopeful. Notice who God calls and chooses to be his peacemakers: it's not the perfect and unbroken; it's the limpers. See 4:6-7 – "In that day ... I will assemble all those who are limping. And those who are lame I will make a remnant, those who are wounded I will make into a

strong nation.” The Messiah brings shalom to the earth and he calls us to believe in him and to join him. But he doesn’t call the perfect; he calls the wounded, the limpers. That’s good news to me because I’m a lifelong limper. I don’t run smoothly through life; I limp. But God has called me to be a peacemaker.

How about you? On this beautiful Christmas Eve night, as we prepare to light the candles and sing the old songs of Christmas, do you have peace with God? Do you know in your heart that you are right with God through Jesus Christ? Do you know God’s call on your life to be a peacemaker? Where is peace lacking or absent in your life with others? What parts of our world break your heart because God’s shalom seems like such a distant dream? Where is God calling you to join Messiah, the Peace-Maker Jesus, to bring the peace of God into his world?